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Editorial: Raise the gas tax

THE ISSUE

The state's gas tax, used to fund infrastructure, hasn't been changed in 22 years.

OUR VIEW

Indiana's leaders need to address this as roads and bridges continue to crumble.

As Tribune reporter Josh Sigler reported in his July 12 story on the issue, Indiana's gas tax hasn't changed in over two decades. The last time it was raised was in 1993, when it was upped from 9 cents to 18.4 cents. This was only the second increase since 1959, as it was also raised from 4 cents to 9 cents in 1990.

This rate has not kept up with inflation. We did some simple math with the help of the website Measuring Worth, and here's what we found: A simple purchasing power calculator would say the relative value of 4 cents in 1959 dollars is 33 cents in 2014 dollars. (This answer is obtained by multiplying 4 cents by the percentage increase in the consumer price index from 1959 to

2014.) We would need to double our current rate just to keep with this figure.

This shortfall is significant because, like the rest of the country, Indiana is doing quite poorly when it comes to infrastructure grading. As Josh's story pointed out, in 2013, the American Society of Civil Engineers gave the United States a "D" grade for its infrastructure, while Indiana received a slightly better grade, receiving a "D-plus." What's more, the state may be facing a half-a-billion-dollar funding gap for upkeep on bridges and highways already in existence. And that's not counting future endeavors of the Indiana Department of Transportation.

Something must be done, and fast. Our gas tax is simply not collecting as much as we once were. The old model is not going to work. Cars are more fuel efficient. People are driving more fuel efficient hybrids and electric vehicles. Fewer people are driving at all.

Perhaps the gas tax should be tied to inflation. Raising the gas tax outright is another possibility. Charging a registration fee based on the number of miles driven is another suggestion. A public information campaign about dedicated funding to road fixes would also be key. (People would be more than willing to plunk down a few more cents per gallon if they knew the intended purpose.)

Whatever happens, the legislature and Gov. Pence need to be proactive, not reactive. We need a long-term solution, not short-term thinking. Let's maintain our roads in a timely manner. We need income coming in to address maintenance issues on an ongoing basis. It's not as if we can afford to let the roads we have completely deteriorate.